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ABSTRACT

Taboo or forbidden topics of conversation are compared for Taiwan, the Republic of China, and United States. Emphasis is on the conveyance of conversational conventions in second language teaching. First, the concept of conversational taboos is examined, noting the non-transferability of taboos across cultures and languages. Four kinds of taboos to be addressed in classroom language instruction are examined: (1) phonological-linked examples of inappropriate usage, such as homonyms or expressions forbidden to certain groups within the culture; (2) animal-linked metaphors and inappropriate animal-related vocabulary; (3) comments on physical attributes, age, income, personal matters, and gestures; and (4) subjects for which euphemisms are expected, including some superstitions. It is recommended that such cultural elements be introduced and explained in the second language classroom to promote cultural sensitivity alongside language learning. (MSE)

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I. Introduction

Among all the features of learning a second language, 'culture' is a feature that puzzles and fascinates most foreign language students. Saville-Troike (1989) states that communication requires not only linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge for interaction but also cultural rules and knowledge which constitutes the content and the process of meaningful communicative interaction. Foreign language teachers are trained and do their utmost to instill in their students a mastery of linguistic aspects of the idioms of their choice. However, as Bonin (1982) pointed out, empirical evidence shows that five years after the learners have left their school nearly all traces of their linguistic ability of a foreign language have ceased to exist. However, their interest in the ways of life of other peoples, cultures, and world views remain throughout their lives. He further states that this fact should serve as an evidence to language teachers that there is a need for them to reorganize their syllabi, redesign their instructional materials, and modify their teaching techniques to improve students' linguistic acquisition and retention while, at the same time, enabling students to understand foreign speakers with greater accuracy. This perhaps can shed some lights to the direction of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

II. Taboo

Taboo is an essential cultural rule in conducting communicative interaction. It is seldom discussed in language textbooks or in classrooms as part of cultural instruction. Yet, taboo is non- transferable cross-culturally in learning a second language. 'Taboo,' sometimes spelled as 'tabu,' is subject to its cultural environment. It is language specific and is not universal or timeless (Adler, 1978). In many cases, foreign language learners realize the existence of the rules only after that they have violated the rules. To those who are not observing these social "rules" can come serious results, such as total

embarrassment, or as Saville-Troike (1989) has suggested, to be imputed of immorality, social ostracism, illness, or even death.

Taboo is a borrowed word from Tongan, a Polynesian language. It refers to "forbidden" or "to be avoided behaviors," both verbal and non-verbal. Once it is a taboo, the reference to it becomes taboo, too. In other words, first one is not allowed to act on certain matters, then one is not allowed to talk about it. It is an expression of the disapproved behavioral appropriateness of a society. It is established because people believe that such behaviors will bring harmful consequences to the people either because it comes from a supernatural belief or it violates the moral code of this society (Wardhaugh, 1992). Taboos occur in all kinds of environments, from ancient to modern society, and at all levels of civilization (Adler, 1978). Members of each community are psychologically and physically trained and shaped by the community to observe the "rules" closely. The punishment might be costly to those who failed to observe the rules in an earlier time period, as described in Clear Blood, a short story by Chang (1993). The character who failed to observe a taboo behavior, not to perform disrespectful acts in front of a family temple, in this case, to bare his chest, paid the ultimate price, his life. It is a common knowledge that a family temple is a sacred place to Chinese. The temple is for the purpose of holding different rituals and ceremonies for the family. Members of the family are allowed to do nothing but respectful behaviors in that place. The punishment is up to the individual community.

In the language classroom, a scale of formality with clothes, titles of address, and rules for participation can be drawn to demonstrate appropriate interaction within a family context (temple, weddings, holidays), within a business context, and within social contexts. An example of classroom discussion is that in the ancient Chinese wedding, not only did it have to not take place at night, but also all involved individuals had to wear

black formal costumes. Later, the color changed to red and evening became the appropriate time. Now under the Western influence, white is the formal customary color for brides and sometimes, for the bridegrooms. The time for the ceremony has become flexible (Ma, 1985).

III. Phonological Linked Taboos

The classroom discussion of rules for social participation should cover appropriateness in the use of words (phonological import as well as semantic connotation) in addition to physical behavior.

In earlier days, people did not understand natural phenomena in China. They ignored the arbitrary relation existing between signifier and signified and assumed that a natural link existed between them. Consequently, they believed that any sound or group of sounds representing evil objects, disasters and other negative occurrences were actually the causes of these disturbances in their lives. Because people yearned to reach (or be close to) a state of "blessing" and to stay as far as it was humanly possible from one of "evil" or "bad luck," they created taboo situations. The phonological parts of a phenomenon came to be perceived as the representative of related evil things; thus, they became art of the taboo system (Shen, 1989). For example, "散 san," a term meaning "to break up, to dismiss, to dissolve" is a "forbidden" word among performers because their professional survival depends on a continuous succession of contracts; for them, the very notion of "breaking up" infers the destruction of their meal ticket. This tradition goes to the extent of preventing a performer not only from voicing this particular word, but even from mentioning any term that includes the same sounds, such as "雨傘 yu san (umbrella)" which contains the same last phoneme. One would resort to substitute expressions, such as "雨擋 yu dang" that actually means "cover from rain." (Cheng, 1984).

In Southern China, seamen's families generally avoid voicing "fan (翻 turn over)" or sound-alike words (Chen, 1992). They associate the disastrous outcome of a ship being overturned in the ocean with the action word for that concept. In fearing that what one says might bring the unwanted consequence into reality, the taboo situation is established. To these families, it is also a taboo behavior to turn the fish upside down after one finishes the meat on the top side. They envision the fish as the ship that carries their love ones and so turning the fish over on the dish would symbolize that the ship has capsized in the ocean.

This type of behavior is by no means a unique one; it occurs in everyday life in China at all levels of society and on all types of occasions. Another example of this sound taboo relates to gifts: one should never present a clock (鐘 zhong) to a Chinese because the pronunciation of "sung zhong (送鐘 giving a clock)" is the same as "sung zhong (送終 to bid farewell to a dying person on his/her deathbed). Thus, the presentation of a clock is literally tantamount to wishing death on its recipient in China (Cheng, 1984). A student who has been told the custom governing "送鐘 sung zhong" will remember the vocabulary. These literal interpretations of metaphors are not shared in the U.S. culture. Therefore, one could imagine the horrified reaction of the listeners as the English expression, "break a leg (to wish someone good luck before a performance)," if used in a similar Chinese environment.

Character Riddles (Shen, 1991), a game showing characters and sound components is useful not only in improving students' recall of character and sound but also in teaching cultural awareness.

IV. Animal Linked Taboos

Chinese believe that human beings are above every other living creatures in the world because human beings can be educated, cultivated, and have the ability to tell right

from wrong and good from evil. Therefore, it is a taboo to refer to a person with an animal metaphor. The colloquial phrase "you are a lucky dog" in English simply means that the listener is lucky; but translated literally into Mandarin, the comment may lead to a fight because it improperly compares a human being to an animal (Chin, 1985). An innocent conversation might lead to a hostile reaction. As described by Guo (1993) in "The Possibility of True Communication between two Different Levels of Language Proficiency," a conversation which took place between a foreign student and a native Chinese speaker in China clearly exemplifies the seriousness of this kind of conflict. An U.S. student of Chinese asked his native Chinese speaker friend "what kind of animal are you?" The shocked native Chinese speaker, since he is a friend of this U.S. student in China, questioned the meaning of it rather than resolving the matter physically. The language student had no idea that he had violated the social rule and replied innocently that he learned that Chinese have a zodiac cycle, 生肖 sheng xiao, which consists of twelve animals. One animal represents one year and twelve years is a complete cycle. By knowing the animal year in which a person is born, one can figure out the age of this person. In other words, this foreign student was merely asking a question of age. Had the question been posed by an American, then it would be about personality profile since each zodiac sign of the Western Constellation has animal traits associated with it. He was not intending to insult the native speaker by calling this friend an animal. English also has a similar category of "dirty" words that are comparable to Chinese in this respect, such as bitch, cow, and chicken- when addressing a person with the name of an animal (Leach, 1964).

V. Opposite Taboos

Other than in a joking situation, Chinese do not make any comment on the looks of a person to whom s/he is talking. If the listener is a married man, the look of his wife is

absolutely a taboo topic in the conversation. These kinds of comments are not only inappropriate but also insulting in Chinese custom (Chen, 1992). Chinese tend to associate physical beauty with seduction and immoral sexual activity. This is not so in the U.S. and should be taught along with the vocabulary word for "pretty." It is a compliment in the U.S. culture. People are glad to accept compliment of physical beauty on proper occasions. Meng (1992) had point out that in the U.S., men are free to tell the opposite sex how pretty the persons look and express openly their feelings toward women. This is not so in Chinese society. Chinese are less willingly to express their emotions.

It is acceptable social behavior to inquire about age, income, or personal matters in Chinese society; however, these are taboo topics in the U.S. culture. Many of the people of the U.S. have this experience: they invite their Chinese friends to visit their homes and as soon as the guests walk into the houses, they ask directly what the market prices are for these houses. One other popular question Chinese would ask directly is about salary. Language teachers should not only introduce the question form "how much/many" but also discuss appropriate and inappropriate situations in which one asks "how much/many."

Another example of acceptable behavior in one culture yet a taboo in another concerns hand signals and physical gestures. Gestures can become an engaging lesson as the teacher directs students in such common dialogue scenes as greeting and introduction. Teachers can adapt an acting technique to demonstrate the usage of kinetics. In one scene the students are cast as Chinese who would greet each other at the door, one inside and the other outside, shake hands and say greeting words at the same time. In another casting, the students would assume Russian identities and enter through the door before

hugging for it is forbidden for the Russians to shake hands across a door (Chen, 1992). Because Russians believe that it will bring misfortune to the actors.

An incident took place last Chinese New Years in Hong Kong which is another sample of this kind of hand signal mis-communication. A television station in Hong Kong took an annual picture of all the contracted entertainers before the end of 1992. A famous Kung-fu actor, Jack Chen, held his fist and stuck his middle finger out on top of the head of an actress who stood before him as a joke. When the photo was in the newspapers, the station received dozens of calls from Westerners living in Hong Kong complaining about the indecent gesture. To the people of the U.S., when two fingers are used in the similar situation, it signifies horns- devilish or feather- Indians as common funny gestures. Yet when the middle finger is used, there is only one interpretation for this gesture- indecency. This gesture might have been borrowed from the West, however, whoever imported this gesture into China, either did not know the meaning of it or did not warn others that certain restrictions must be applied in using this non-verbal behavior. So when Chinese apply this gesture in a group photo session as a common practical joke on a person standing in the front line, they would stick out whichever numbers of figure(s) behind one's head as they please. To them, it merely suggests that someone has grown horns on his/her head, implying abnormality of this person. It took a while for the Chinese to realize what these Westerners were complaining about. The actor refused to apologize because it was not intended to be an insult and since the gesture was not considered as one in Chinese society, it was only a regrettable incident.

VI. Taboos and Euphemisms

Some of the taboo practices are shared by many communities, though for different reasons. In many South Asian communities, addressing a husband, a respected or a senior member of a family, the name is usually avoided (Shapiro & Schiffman, 1983).

Chinese observes this taboo, too. Chinese have a very detailed and complex kinship system and naming system (Shen, 1989 & 1990). The characters which had been used in an older generation of a family would not be used in naming the children of a younger generation. The younger members of a family would avoid voicing the names and the sounds of names of senior members, especially parents and grandparents. This procedure is magnified in names of Emperors throughout history. The names of emperors and especially male members of royal family may not be voiced by any subjects in the empire. Members of the royal courts had to observe avoiding voicing any sound-alike expressions of those names in their interaction with each other. They replaced the slots with euphemisms. In modern times, these rules are rarely observed by the younger generation.

"Death" is another taboo subject for both Easterners and Westerners. In English, people use euphemistic expressions to indicate death, for example, "pass away" or "gone," et cetera and so do Chinese in similar situations. "死 Si (to die)" is not used directly, it is always "長眠 chang mian (sleep forever)," "心臟停止了跳動 xin zang ting zhi le tiao dong (the heart stops working)," or "過了 guo le (have passed)," etc (Chen, 1992). In some of the regions, since "死 si (to die)" and "四 si (four)" share the same sound, people skip the number "four" in counting on certain occasions. This is magnified in a hospital situation. A Chinese patient will react far more strongly to being assigned to a room or a floor in a hospital with a number four that sounds like "death" than would an U.S. patient to be assigned to a room or a floor of thirteen. In Taiwanese, a dialect spoken on the island of Taiwan, "死 si (to die)" and "四 si (four)" are pronounced the same. There are so many Taiwanese people who observe this taboo. There is no Number Four Bus, publicly or privately owned. There is no Room Number Four or Floor Four in hospitals and hotels (Lin, 1989). This phenomenon made the Motor Vehicle Bureau

finally strike the number four out of any combination for distributing numbers in car plates because all recipients refused to accept it. Again the vocabulary word for "four" will be reinforced by explaining its connotation.

VII. Conclusion

In the language classrooms, these kinds of cultural elements should be introduced and explained. As foreign language teachers, we want to train our students to be culturally sensitive and aware in order to avoid violating cultural rules in conducting communicative interactions. It is a great task for language teachers to prepare their students both linguistically and culturally in interacting and dealing with these kinds of hidden dimensions of cross-cultural communication. However, we must at least achieve a state that our students are equipped with basic knowledge and are, in a computer term, "expendable" for future learning. As language teachers, we must cater and tailor our teaching materials and classroom instructions according to what our students need and want in reality. If our language students wish to be linguistically and culturally competent in completely immersing into the language and culture of the target people, these are the rules that they must observe and respect.

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